

## Baton Rouge, LA – The Advocate

### Juvenile center praised for work



BILL FEIG/The Advocate

State Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek speaks Thursday at the Jetson Center for Youth during an event honoring teens who have earned their GEDs. 'I want this school (Jetson's Scenic High) to be the best it can be,' he told the students. 'You matter; you count; you're important to me and I want you to get the best education you can get.'

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Renis Waters III returned Thursday to Jetson Center for Youth, but this time he came as a visitor to the state's juvenile secure-care facility and not because of a judge's orders.

Waters, 18, of Westwego, returned with his parents in tow, Nicole and Renis Waters Sr., to collect his class ring during a ceremony at the facility honoring students who earned their GEDs while serving sentences at the facility.

State Superintendent of Education Paul Pastorek was the featured speaker at the event.

But the program was run by some of Jetson's teenage wards, all wearing dress slacks and polo shirts, who read poetry, sang songs and introduced the speakers.

The other teens who call Jetson home, all wearing T-shirts and jeans, sat attentively in the audience.

"I love these days," said Daron Brown, director of Jetson. "We get to showcase our kids, and we're really proud of them."

Brown said there is no difference between other teenagers and the teenagers at Jetson, which is home to about 75 boys and young men ranging in ages from 13 to 20 who ran afoul of the law.

"Our kids have made a mistake," Brown said. "But they're working hard to overcome that."

When Waters walked to the podium to get his high school class ring, the other boys cheered and applauded, almost as loudly as his parents.

“I never thought we’d see this day two years ago,” Waters’ mother said. “He was not going anywhere.”

That’s when young Waters ended up at Jetson after he fired a gun inside city limits when he was 16 years old.

“Back then, I was sleeping all of the time and just getting into trouble,” Waters said. “I decided I didn’t want to be like that anymore.”

While at Jetson, Waters said, he discovered he has artistic capabilities.

“One of his pictures was displayed in a local hotel,” his mother said. “I am so proud of him.”

And now Waters is attending classes at a college where he is focusing on art.

“He’s just changed so much,” Nicole Waters said. “And, oh my gosh, I give all of the credit to Jetson.”

She said Jetson counselors spent hours and hours of “one-on-one time” with her son, helping him work through his problems.

“This was it for him,” she said, indicating Jetson was her son’s last hope for straightening out.

But praise for the facility, which was built in the 1940s and has housed juvenile delinquents since then, has been sparse over the years.

About four years ago, Jetson was removed from federal court supervision, where it was placed in the late 1990s because of violence and abuse.

During the past two years, great strides have been made to reform the facility, said Jerel Giarrusso, a spokeswoman for the state Office of Juvenile Justice.

Gone are the razor wire fences that once surrounded each building. Now there are picnic tables on grassy areas landscaped with flowers, trees and shrubs.

Also gone are the color-coded T-shirts that identified what offense each boy committed, including sex offenders.

Another significant change is the number of boys. Only a few years ago, more than 200 boys were housed there; now, that’s been reduced to about 75.

The facility now is operated using a therapeutic approach rather than a correctional approach, Giarrusso said.

“Things are just much, much better out here,” she said.